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ABSTRACT

Awareness of the corporate cultural phenomenon of fast-tracking, a process whereby executives are advanced within and among organizations, should assist communication students and practicing professionals to become more effective corporate communicators. A critical distinction between self-directed fast-trackers and their corporately-sanctioned peers is that self-directed fast-trackers can better control the pace and risks they assume, and they can also exert greater control over the rewards for success. Corporately sanctioned fast-trackers normally must contend with a higher level of uncertainty concerning risks, rewards, and relationships. A self-directed fast-tracker often holds his/her own dangling carrot stick. A corporately sanctioned fast-tracker's stick is held by someone else. Rewards abound for both, however. (Thirteen references are attached.) (KEH)

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"Fast-Tracking": Ain't No Golden Parachute

So Don't Slide Off the Rainbow

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Abstract

"Fast-Tracking": Ain't No Golden Parachute
So Don't Slide Off the Rainbow

"Fast-tracking," a process whereby executives are advanced within and among organizations, is developed from an organizational culture perspective. Both self-directed fast-tracking and formal corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking are examined as distinctive organizational cultural performances.

Fast-tracking is a corporate cultural phenomenon born both in the "careerist reverie of the baby-boom elite" (Kiechel, 1982) and the executive suite. From the upwardly mobile baby-boomer's perspective, fast-tracking involves self-directed "career pathing," originating with advanced academic degree acquisition (MBA, MA, MSM, MSIR, LLD, etc.) and finding resolution through selective job-hopping into "general management" and, subsequent, ascension to the top. From the perspective of the executive suite fast-tracking involves "formal corporately-sanctioned manpower development programs designed to prepare people to move into higher positions earlier than might be expected" (Ball, 1985).

One ultimate goal of organizational communication research is to position communication educators to help students and practicing professionals to become more effective corporate communicators. This often involves the development of communication savvy relevant to job acquisition and corporate advancement. Whether self-directed or formal corporately-sanctioned, fast-tracking is an area replete with possibilities for those prospecting for the organizational "pot of gold". This paper will examine organizational communication as fast-tracking with respect to perceptions related to the phenomenon as reported by corporate insiders of executive or managerial status; corporately-oriented journalists; and speech communication researchers.

Kiechel summarized the baby-boomer self-directed fast-track formula as:

> Bust your hump in college to get good grades, then parlay those into admission to a business school, the bigger the name, the better. Upon graduation, take a high-prestige job in management consulting or with some corporate colossus and use it for two or three years to hone your skills, promote your visibility, and generally 'develop your instrument,' in Mary Cunningham's curious phrase.
>
> After the first job, a brisk hopscotch onward; change postions, change companies, touch down in a given square long enough to leave an imprint but not to get stuck. Pretty soon, you break into the category labeled 'general mangement'. From there on in your ascent to the top, it's a matter of steadily increasing responsibility, concomitant perks and status, and enough money to do what you want (p. 313).

If Kiechel's description seems annoyingly cynical, a survey of chief executive officers of Fortune 500 companies reveals that fewer than 40% of the CEO's were one-company persons. That is, only 192 spent their entire careers at the companies they wound up running (Morrison, 1981, p. 127). Edward Hennessy, for example, who rose to the position of chief executive of Allied Chemical had been employed by six other Fortune 500 companies. Morrison pointed out that:

> Hennessy learned acquisitions at Textron (1950-55) and Lear Siegler (1956-60), financial controls at ITT (1960-64),

> international operations at Colgate-Palmolive (1964-1965), marketing at Heublein (1965-72), and operating experience at United Technologies (1973-77) (p. 127).

The job-hopping aspect of self-directed fast-tracking may not be an insidious abuse of employers' trust and training investments. George Strichman (who ascended to the position of CEO of Colt Industries) was a graduate of the "world's largest university" -- General Electric. Morrison reported that GE (as well as Ford) has distinquished itself as a breeding ground for a dozen individuals who went on to head other companies on the Fortune 500 list. He pointed out that GE brings 2,000 young college graduates into its mangement training program each year. Strichman observed that "GE trains so many more people than it needs, you may end up sitting on a shelf and have to leave" (Morrison, p. 129). Insidious or not, Rowan (1981) indicated that "turnover among managers out of college less than five years has quintupled since 1960, to the extent that the average corporation today can count on losing 50% of its college recruits within five years" (p. 54).

Considering Kiechel's formula for self-directed fast-trackers, "touch down in a given square long enough to leave an imprint but not enough to get stuck," one might wonder what intrapersonal conflict fast-trackers might be struggling to manage concerning their covert realities and day-to-day overt communications. The presence of a corporate self as individually motivated by personal goals, and corporate self as selectively revealed to others supports the notion

that fast-trackers are "choice-making individuals who adopt different roles in varied contexts to particular audiences" (Trujillo, 1985, p. 203). The self-directed fast-tracker must carefully avoid falling into the "tangled web we weave" scenario and being labeled a Machiavellian.

The environment that self-directed fast-trackers perform within places additional pressures on the performers. Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) suggested that in the theatrical sense organizational members "act in ways which reflect the social conventions of other organization members" (p. 130). This can place special demands on job-hopping self-directed fast-trackers. Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggested that skills that create success in one company's culture can cause failure in another's. The switch from a ploddingly cautious environment to a "do this yesterday" setting can challenge one's ability to accurately assess his/her strengths and limitations along a changing continuum of employer expectations.

Successful self-directed fast-tracking involves careful cultivation of political, as well as theatrical, skills. William Hamilton, District Employee Relations Manager for Atlantic Richfield Corporation, has suggested (1983) that corporate reputation cultivation and maintenance is of essential importance. "Leaving one's imprint" as opposed to leaving an irremovable blotch is certainly a desired outcome of a self-directed fast-tracker's tenure at a corporation. There are several ways of accomplishing this purpose (assuming that one can handle assigned job responsibilities competently)

through job performance related communicative acts. Hamilton re-emphasized the common suggestion that it can, at times, be beneficial for an individual to volunteer for work beyond his/her job description. He stressed that being viewed as a visibly active contributor in the work environment (without allowing others to take advantage) enhances an individual's credibility. Fraker (1984), additionally, suggested that active seeking of high-risk, high-reward assignments is the "right route to the top" (p. 43).

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) suggested that some of the political performances of organizational culture involve "recruitment of allies and the establishment of relations with 'loyal' others" (p. 142). Possessing the communicative savvy required for such activity is essential for fast-trackers. Regardless of approach (i.e., when courtesies and favors are reciprocated) the processes related to "cementing allies" appear to hold substantial potential for fast-trackers, not only for their current corporate settings, but, additionally, for somewhere "down the road."

Hamilton added another factor relevant to "leaving one's imprint" -- possessing "panache" (one's personal style or individual flair for doing things). He presented an illustrative example:

> Once a district manager was asked by his corporate vice president for some information. The request came in a letter. The manager immediately forwarded the requested information. One week later the vice President's secretary called the manager saying that he sent the wrong information and

asked him if he could read. The manager put the secretary on hold, pulled the original request, checked the information that he had forwarded and discovered that he did, in fact, forward the information as requested. The manager got the secretary back on the line and informed her that he had just checked a list of names of fifty individuals in the corporation who could redress him and that her name was not on it. After additional, more amiable, information sharing, the error was discovered. The secretary had forwarded the wrong request. To this day the district manager has no stronger ally in the corporation (p. 4).

The Case of Earl "Butch" Dulaney

Earl "Butch" Dulaney's career is an example of self-directed fast-tracking. After receiving his BA and MA from respected liberal arts institutions, he earned his Ph.D. in communication from Oklahoma. Dulaney completed a brief teaching stint at Texas A & M before beginning a ten year corporate career that has led him into four different Fortune 500 companies: IBM, CCX, Wal-Mart and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

At IBM, after a lengthy technical training program in Dallas, Dulaney became a systems engineer and coordinated IBM's technical relations with other corporate branches in Arkansas. Among his clients were Southwestern Bell, Dillards, and CCX. An extended period of liaison work with CCX led to a "double your salary" offer post in technical support staffing at CCX. As the project team leader of an effort to network main frame computers, Dulaney was charged with helping the company "grow into the future". Shortly after becoming a Vice President with CCX, an old IBM contact was influential in Dulaney's move to Wal-Mart (another better offer).

Dulaney managed computer applications at Wal-Mart. His major responsibility was recruiting and training programmers and analysts for the nation's

fastest growing retailer. During his three year tenure as manager of long term computer applications, the staff grew from 60 to 150. Pressures of recruiting and training in a highly competitive and complex operation and the high demands Wal-Mart made on his personal time motivated Dulaney to seek another job shift. A high-tech managerial "head-hunter" for the conglomerate, Pepsico, was able to coax him to join Kentucky Fried Chicken at the corporate level in Louisville.

At KFC Dulaney is Director of Restaurant Systems. His current task involves interaction with National Cash Register introducing PC/registers in 1,300 company-owned stores. Dulaney finds the family orientation of the corporate culture at KFC much more compatible to his life-style than the other settings where he was worked. Upward movement at KFC is Dulaney's most obvious career path at this time, and the networking possibilities with other branches in Pepsico presents interesting possibilities for the future.

Self-directed fast-trackers may periodically experience crises of conscience involving the consideration of ethical issues related to their choice-making behaviors. They may find solace in the knowledge that many of their dedicated "one-company" peers find themselves unexpectedly unemployed in bad times. Certainly, some of the organizational performances of members of corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking programs overlap some of the performances of their self-directed peers, but the two cultural orientations bear some marked distinctions. Formal corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking will now be examined.

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) identified enculturation as a prominent organizational cultural performance area (pp. 143-

145). They viewed enculturation as referring to "to those processes by which organizational members acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to behave as competent members" (p. 143). As opposed to experiencing normal orientation and initiation performances reserved for corporate newcomers, new employees included in a corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking program are simultaneously taught and screened (in terms of their likely success for exerting corporate leadership) (Goldhaber, 1990, p. 47).

Jan Ball, Manager of Communication and Organizational Development for TRW Corporation, suggested (1985) that while corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking programs may differ in structure and design most share five common elements:

1. Those hired for membership in such programs are normally between the ages of 25 and 35; have at least a bachelors degree and often an advanced degree in a business related area; and usually have some related work experience.
2. Fast-trackers are usually recruited from top schools by corporate sources.
3. Fast-tracking programs usually run about two years before participants are put into the organization mainstream.
4. The fast-tracking process is unnatural as it circumvents traditional avenues and accelerates the career growth process.
5. The process of building relationships is strained.

    Relationship development must take place at an artificially fast rate.

> Fast-trackers must, at times, contend with stigmatization (i.e., being viewed as a threat, or as a corporate spy, etc.)
> Fast-trackers must, at times, contend with other personality weaknesses (i.e., jealousy).
> Supervisors may feel a burden of being responsible for a subordinate fast-tracker's success.
> Formal relationships can be ritualistic (i.e., the formal relationship may give a fast-tracker access to higher ups, but as one fast-tracker reported, "It's hard to call a VP and say 'I want to talk,' without feeling like I'm intruding") (pp. 2-7).

Interestingly, it appears that self-directed fast-trackers following Kiechel's formula would be well suited applicants for positions in corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking programs.

A critical distinction between self-directed fast-trackers and their corporately-sanctioned peers is that self-directed fast-trackers can better control the pace and risks they assume, and they can also exert greater control over the rewards for success. Corporately-sanctioned fast-trackers normally must contend with a higher level of uncertainty concerning risks, rewards, and relationships. A self-directed fast-tracker often holds his/her own dangling carrot stick. A corporately-sanctioned fast-tracker's stick is held by someone else.

Graduates of corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking programs observe:

"It's not for everyone, the pressure is weighty, but the rewards are substantial." -- Division Head, General Electric

"It's like being enrolled in a university 'scholars' program. The work is tougher and everybody is watching you." -- Vice President, Southwestern Bell

"Sometimes you feel trapped. You can't always pick and choose your moves." -- District Sales Manager, IBM

"The rewards are plentiful, as plentiful as the ***risks.*** *" -- Employee Relations Executive, Exxon*

Whether an individual is a self-directed fast-tracker or a member of a corporately-sanctioned fast-tracking program there is little doubt that a fabulous pot of gold is waiting at the end of the fast-tracking rainbow -- for those who do not slide off.

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